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CIA joins fight for life of victim of poison beans

By Elizabeth Price

A woman here who tried to kill herself is the focus of efforts by doctors at Lakeside Hospital, the Central Intelligence Agency and international experts, all of whom are trying to keep her alive.

The expertise of such a far-reaching mix of doctors was drawn together by one who remembered that the poison the woman took also was used in the celebrated assassination of Bulgarian defector Georgi I. Markov in London in 1978.

The woman, 48, was out of immediate danger yesterday, but she remained in intensive care, Lakeside reported.

She and her husband fought Tuesday evening. Afterward she became depressed and ate about a dozen castor beans, which contain a lethal poison called ricin. The packet of beans was clearly marked with warnings, said Dr. Leigh Thompson, a clinical pharmacologist.

The woman became ill, and was eventually taken to Lakeside's medical intensive care unit, where Thompson was on duty.

Doctors got the envelope that contained the castor beans, and thus were able to identify the poison. There is no test to identify it — and no known antidote.

But Thompson remembered that the same poison — ricin — was used to assassinate Markov, who died of ricin poisoning after an assassin shot him in the leg with a pellet fired from an umbrella gun.

"We were talking about the Markov case, and we knew we'd either have to call the Russian embassy or the CIA," Thompson said.

Thompson phoned the medical division of the CIA in Langley, Va., hoping doctors there could advise him on treating his patient. He was put in touch with Dr. Christopher Green, a physician who has a special interest in ricin.

A CIA spokesman said Green has studied the scientific literature dealing with ricin and knows scientists in research centers around the world who are experts in the poison. He contacted many of them for Thompson, and asked advice on how to treat the stricken woman here.

University Hospitals doctors had already begun cleansing her blood and giving her plasma transfusions. Her potassium, calcium and magnesium levels had dropped dangerously low, and they gave her large doses to raise those levels.

During one conversation, Green advised Thompson to keep a sharp watch for irregular heartbeats which could kill the patient. And at that very moment, the woman's heart began beating irregularly.

Thompson ordered doctors in the intensive care unit to put a pacemaker on the woman's heart to keep it beating normally. That stabilized her condition.

Since there is no known antidote, the treatment has consisted primarily of plasma transfusions, monitoring her vital signs and correcting any unexpected problems.

If she does live, she may be the first known survivor of ricin poisoning. Doctors around the world will learn from her case how to diagnose and treat other ricin poisonings.

Thompson said the poison is so lethal that one bean could kill a child, and four or five would kill an adult. Ricin acts fairly slowly, however. Markov died four days after being hit with the poison pellet.

Ricin kills when it enters the bloodstream, causing the blood's red cells, white cells and platelets to stick to themselves like glue. That causes all the victim's organs to fail.

In addition to contacting the CIA, the doctors called the Northrup King Co. in Minneapolis, growers of the bean seeds.

Cindy Folland, a horticulturist for Northrup, told The Plain Dealer, "This is a first for us, the first intentional poisoning. This was a big shock."

To her knowledge, no one has ever died from eating castor beans, she said, although a child once chewed a bean briefly and became ill, but recovered.

Folland explained that many plants are toxic. Castor beans, as well as the stems and leaves of the plant, are very toxic. Castor oil, made from the beans, is refined and thus not toxic.

She said she doubts that the company will change the castor bean packages because the packets